



Judith Ortiz Cofer

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I had brains for sure and some talent in writing. These facts were a constant in my life. My skin color, my size, and my appearance were variables- things that were judged according to my current self-image, the aesthetic values of the times, the places I was in, and the people I met. My studies, later my writing, the respect of people who saw me as an individual person they cared about, these were the criteria for my sense of self-worth that I would concentrate on in my adult life

— “The Story of My Body,” The Latin Deli

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Biography

“At three or four o’clock in the afternoon, the hour of cafe con leche, the women of my family gathered in Mama’s living room to speak of important things and to tell stories for the hundredth time, as if to each other, meant to be overheard by us young girls, their daughters?” This quotation comes from the beginning of *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* by Judith Ortiz Cofer. *Silent Dancing* is a collection of semi-autobiographical essays. In Cofer’s own words, it is a collection of short pieces of “creative non-fiction” (Ocasio 737). Ortiz Cofer defines herself primarily as an artist. In her works, she explores what it means to be a writer in the face of negotiating what it means to be a Puerto Rican, an American, and a woman. Creating individual and community identities is a key aspect of Ortiz Cofer’s life as an author. She is interested in the creative process and giving voice to the many characters in her life.

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1952
- * Lived in Puerto Rico when she was young, and goes back to visit often
- * Writes in a mix of English and Spanish

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Biography continued

Judith Ortiz Cofer was born in Hormigueros, Puerto Rico on February 24, 1952. Her mother was a young bride and her father was in the US Navy. She spent her formative years being shuttled between Puerto Rico and Paterson, New Jersey, where her father was stationed. Anytime her father was on extended leave, Ortiz Cofer and her family went back to “the island” to spend time in her Grandmother’s casa, or house. In her Grandmother’s, or Mama’s, casa, she was introduced to the many cuentos, or tales, of her family. These cuentos provided Ortiz Cofer with her passion for storytelling.

Ortiz Cofer’s mother tried hard to maintain her island heritage; she always viewed herself as being in temporary isolation when she found herself on the mainland. She held fast to the traditions and family values she knew well. Ortiz Cofer’s father, on the other hand, thought that in order for his children to have the best educational and career opportunities, he had to fight hard to disassociate himself from his beloved island. He didn’t want them to have the limited choices that he perceived himself to have been faced with as a boy coming into adulthood. These two opposing worldviews created a disconnect that Ortiz Cofer attempts to resolve through her writing.

Ortiz Cofer was educated primarily in the US, except for her first two years of school. Most of her primary and all of her secondary education was completed in the States. Her formative years were spent in public school; in the sixth grade, she entered a private, Catholic school. After riots broke out in 1968, near their home in Paterson, her family relocated to Georgia where she finished her last two years of high school. She received her B.A in English at Augusta College in 1974. She went on to receive her Masters in English at Florida Atlantic University in 1977. During this time, she attended a graduate summer program at the prestigious Oxford University where she was an English Speaking Union of America Fellow. Ortiz Cofer has been awarded national fellowships and grants by the Fine Arts Council (1980), National Endowment for the Arts (1989), the Witter Bynner Foundation (1988) and the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference (1987). Her first novel, *In the Line of the Sun*, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1989. Subsequently, the novel was named one of the “Twenty-five most Memorable Books” of that same year. One of her collections of poetry, *Peregrina* (1986), was a winning manuscript in the Riverstone International Chapbook Competition. She has also won the Pushcart Prize (1990), O. Henry Prize (1994), Anisfield Wolf Award (1994) and Christ-Janner Award for Creative Research (1998), along with many other awards and prizes. In the spring of 2001, she acted as a visiting writer at Vanderbilt University.



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It wasn't until Ortiz Cofer had finished her Masters thesis that she really began to explore the possibility of becoming a writer. During her extensive research, she found herself overcome with the need to write a quick poem or story line on the back of her index cards. Frustrated and disturbed by the idea that something was missing from her life, she felt that these outbursts of creativity brought her closer to understanding the crux of these feelings. Ortiz Cofer states, "It wasn't until I traced this feeling to its source that I discovered both the cause and answer to my frustration: I needed to write" (*The Latin Deli*, 166). Shortly after, encouraged by a colleague, she sent out a poem and it was published. Poetry is Ortiz Cofer's first love, but she does not always adhere to its boundaries. She finds her voice through the use of a variety of genres. Over the years, she has created poems, essays, novels, short stories and works of creative non-fiction. According to Ortiz Cofer, "The decision about genre is made when I sit down and decide the parameters of what I'm writing" (Kallet, 75). Her ability to move easily between genres mirrors her ability to adapt to her sometimes conflicting surroundings.

She uses this ability, along with explorations of language and memory, as tools to negotiate her own voice in the literary world. The power of words to transform and create meaning and identity are key themes that thread her works together. For Ortiz Cofer, words and meaning are intrinsically entwined with memory. In the beginning of *Silent Dancing*, Ortiz Cofer discusses the subjective nature of memory and the importance of claiming memories in order to make them your own. Ortiz Cofer uses the telling of her memories to represent an aspect of identity that is transitional and that molds with its context. Memory is dependent on the emotions of the individual during the process of recollection. The juxtaposition of Ortiz Cofer's memories in *Silent Dancing* provides insight into how Judith Ortiz Cofer defines herself.

Ortiz Cofer's explorations of identity formations are not only found in the context of her memories, but also exist in the spaces created between them. Again, she uses language to decipher these spaces. Although she spent most of her childhood in the U.S., her home life acted as an anchor to her Puerto Rican past. Her mother was vigilant in keeping their home a microcosm of the island. Outside the home, Ortiz Cofer dealt in English, yet within the home her language was Spanish. Ortiz Cofer remembers that as a child she often felt that neither language suited her: "I was constantly made to feel like an oddball by my peers, who made fun of my two-way accent: a Spanish accent when I spoke English; and, when I spoke Spanish, I was told that I sounded like a 'Gringa'" (*Silent Dancing* 17).



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Biography continued

Ortiz Cofer's two spoken languages never shed their inherent influence on each other. Although she writes in English, Ortiz Cofer often intersperses Spanish words throughout her texts, allowing the two languages to exist simultaneously. She creates an inter- or trans-lingual reality (Bruce-Novoa 94). Ortiz Cofer uses her writing to define herself in relation to the spaces between the cultures in which she finds herself. She draws on the power of language, genre, and memory to negotiate these liminal spaces.

Another important aspect of Ortiz Cofer's writing is her commitment to creating community. She not only uses her writing to carve out her own sense of identity, she also attempts to evoke similar responses in others. As she explains in *Women in Front of the Sun*, she seeks to inspire and move her readers, "My poetry, my stories, and my essays concern themselves with the coalescing of languages and cultures into a vision that had meaning first of all for me; then, if I am served well by my craft and the transformation occurs, it will also have meaning for others as art" (*Women in Front of the Sun* 120).

Currently, Ortiz Cofer lives with her husband, John Cofer, and has one daughter, Tanya. She is a Franklin Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Georgia. She continues to write and to receive high recognition for her work. She also travels extensively around the country, appearing as a keynote speaker or featured writer at a variety of institutions. Her novel *The Meaning of Consuelo* was selected as one of two winners of the 2003 Americas Award of the National Consortium of Latin American Studies Programs, and was included on the New York Public Library's "Books for the Teen Age 2004 List." Her latest book is the young adult novel *Call Me Maria*.



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Spanish

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